

## Provins (France)

No 873

### Identification

<i>Nomination</i>	Provins, town of medieval fairs
<i>Location</i>	Région Ile-de-France, Département de la Seine-et-Marne
<i>State Party</i>	France
<i>Date</i>	30 June 2000

### Justification by State Party

The town of Provins was built on a site well suited for defence, selected by the Counts of Champagne for the establishment of a political and military stronghold soon to become a nerve centre of European trade. An important financial, industrial, and intellectual centre, Provins contributed to the development of culture and trade over two centuries; today it is an exceptionally well preserved example of a west European trading town. Its medieval atmosphere is due not only to an exceptional concentration of ancient buildings but also to many details, such as the paving, old wells, and even the rose, the symbol of Provins. In the Lower Town, the mills, the wash basins, and the tanneries document some of the principal activities. There are gardens scattered throughout the town and five farms are still in use today.

Provins has preserved a considerable number of civic and religious buildings and it retains most of its medieval town plan. The original ramparts extend over 1.5km and the walls of the Upper Town are intact. The fortifications of the Lower Town are clearly traceable, though replaced by boulevards starting in the 18th century. The principal axes of communication, along the trade routes of Champagne, are still in place. Some of the gardens between the Bourg and the ramparts have been divided into plots over the past century, but many still exist.

Because of economic stagnation from the 14th to the 19th centuries, the town underwent no major development. However, instead of becoming a museum town, it was adapted to modern life and has integrated new residences remarkably well without modifying the urban layout. At the same time, Provins continues to live and function within its medieval perimeter, relating to a period when it was the third largest city in France, after Paris and Rouen.

Although sited curiously outside the earlier major Gallo-Roman routes, the objective was to derive every benefit from its location in the new communication artery through central France. The bipolar settlements of the Châtel (Upper Town)

and the valley (Lower Town) were soon joined, forming an ensemble with a remarkable canal system that has merited the appellation of “Little Venice” by romantics. There is no doubt that it is the most beautiful example of a trade town in the western Europe, which still presents the original locations of its functions. The position of the town favoured the development of a stopover along the commercial routes running from south-west to north-east. In 1137 and 1164 Count Henry the Liberal of Champagne conferred the privilege of holding fairs to Provins. Safe conducts granted by the Counts made it possible for trade connections to develop between Europe and the Orient.

Today, Provins is a veritable conservatory of medieval military, religious, and civic architecture. Its fortifications are a dictionary of military architecture with a diversity of creative solutions. The town has a number of characteristic constructions, such as the cellars of the Upper Town and the vaulted ground floors of the Lower Town, used as storage for the fairs. The churches that were saved from the ravages of the Revolution offer interesting records of the history of architecture. A cultural centre with considerable economic and commercial weight, Provins was at the root of banking development and monetary policies, a clearing house for world economy at the time. A city of fairs, its cloth trade was well known. The theologian Abélard (1079–1142) taught there and Count Thibault IV (1222–53) was one of the greatest troubadours of his time. Provins is also associated with the name of a rose, brought from Jericho during the Crusades, which had an enormous success due to its medical virtues.

The site of Provins, a town of medieval fairs within the early 13th century enclosure, is proposed for inscription on the World Heritage List on the basis of **criteria ii, iii, and iv**:

**ii** The site bears witness to a considerable exchange of economic, commercial, and cultural influences during the period from the 11th to 13th centuries, and to the planning of the town in this period, involving drainage of marshland, creation of a system of water management, and building of the fortified enclosure.

**iii** The site is exceptional and even unique testimony to medieval civilization, rediscovering almost intact the locations of the most significant fairs in Europe. It is directly associated with the economic development of Christianity in the Middle Ages, which has been of outstanding universal significance for the progress of exchange and of civilization.

**iv** The site is a well known example of a type of construction, especially noteworthy for its cellars and vaulted ground floors, which exemplifies a significant period in human history, the beginning of economic trade in Europe.

As a historic town, and located in an exceptional natural setting, the site has well preserved the stratigraphy of its evolution, demonstrating the spatial organizations and the characteristic structural systems of the succeeding phases of its history.

## Category of property

In terms of the categories of cultural property set out in Article 1 of the 1972 World Heritage Convention, this is a *group of buildings*.

## History and Description

### History

In the Gallo-Roman period, the site of present-day Provins was related to two important regional axes: the route from Soissons to Troyes towards the north and the route to Sens to the south-west. These two routes, together with the valley of the Seine, form an important communication artery enclosing the rocky spur of the early settlement. The origin of the name Provins is uncertain but could be an abbreviation of *Probus Vinum*. The earliest document related to Provins is an ordinance by Charlemagne of 802 which indicates that the site was already an established fort. In 983 the site became part of the lands of the powerful Counts of Champagne, one of the great feudal domains in France, and a favoured place of residence of the Counts.

Because of its political and commercial importance, the castle (*Châtel*) on the high ground was fortified in the 11th and 12th centuries. The original enclosure (*castrum*) was small, including, in addition to the castle, the Collegiate Church of Saint-Quiriace and the Palace of the Counts. However, the settlement grew up rapidly outside the fortifications and this, too, was encircled by a defensive wooden wall in the late 12th century. A third set of fortifications, this time in stone, was added in the first half of the 13th century, to protect the houses and stalls erected for the great fairs in the town outside the earlier walls, down in the river valley.

Provins is thus one of the four towns (together with Troyes, Lagny, and Bar-sur-Aube) where medieval fairs were held in the reign of the Counts of Champagne, developing here from the 11th to the 14th century. Of the four towns, Provins is the only one to retain its original medieval fabric; the others have been substantially altered. The importance of the fairs in Champagne is at the beginning of the process. Their location in central France was along the favoured route to the north. Their political and economic ambitions decided the development by the Counts of Champagne of a system of fairs that were regularly programmed over a yearly cycle, avoiding overlaps and competition. The fairs led to merchants converging here from all over Europe and from the Orient. They became important centres of banking; the Provins *denier* was one of the few currencies accepted widely throughout the continent of Europe. The towns also became centres of intellectual and artistic life, and Abélard and Chrétien de Troyes are known to have spent time in Provins. The fairs continued from 1120 until 1320, when the economic and political situation changed, and commercial contacts developed elsewhere, particularly with the Hanseatic League, Flanders, and Italy. The function of Provins was thus reduced to a local context.

Provins is fortunate in having preserved good documentation dating from the 12th century onwards, which has helped to throw light on the entire process of development and its consequences.

It is important to distinguish between a market and a fair. A market could be a yearly event, or even a continuous activity, where the purpose was to sell goods directly to consumers. A fair, on the other hand, indicated an activity that was aimed at merchants and dealers, with an international character. It was generally composed of three parts: first the presentation and study of merchandise by potential customers, then negotiation and acquisition, and finally legal verification of the sales that had taken place. The fair required long-distance transport systems and special conditions to guarantee safety and security. Fairs were also accompanied by the development of a multitude of other activities, which together gave the incentive and motivation for the development of a particular type of urban fabric. The historic town of Provins, therefore, can be seen as a materialization of a built framework for the fairs.

The Counts of Champagne starting losing interest in the region on assuming the crown of Navarre in 1234. In 1284, with the marriage of Philip the Fair (Philippe IV le Bel) to Jeanne of Navarre, Champagne (and with it Provins) became part of the royal domain. The town was in English hands during the 15th century but was finally to become French at the end of the Hundred Years' War. Provins was not to be affected to any marked extent by the Industrial Revolution. It has survived to the present day as a small market town, and so has escaped the demolitions and reconstructions that other towns have undergone, allowing it to conserve its medieval form.

### Description

The town developed to the south of the Brie chalk plateau, in a gently hilly region at the confluence of the valleys of the Voulzie and the Durteint. It consists of the Upper Town (*Ville Haute*, known as the *Châtel* until the Revolution), which grew up on a spur of the Brie plateau, and the Lower Town (*Ville Basse*, pre-Revolutionary *Val*), lying further to the east at the confluence of two rivers. These two parts together form the present nomination. The area totals 1472ha and its population is now c 12,000, having been estimated c 10,000 (or even more) in the Middle Ages.

The Upper Town is characterized by the small houses built in stone and timber-framed construction and by green areas and gardens. There are two large buildings, the so-called *Tour de César* (Caesar's Tower) and the Romanesque-Gothic church of *Saint-Quiriace*. Caesar's Tower, or the Big Tower, is a stone structure, dating initially from the 12th century, which consists of three large spaces one above the other, covered with a conical roof from the 17th century. The name of Caesar refers to a romantic association with ancient Rome. Construction of the church of Saint-Quiriace began with a choir of impressive size in the 12th century and went on until the decline of Provins in 1320 up to the crossing of the nave and two bays beyond. The vaults above the crossing were damaged in a fire in the 17th century and were replaced with a dome.

The centre of the town was the old market square, surrounded by houses that developed in relation to the fairs, each with large vaulted underground storage spaces. The 12th century ramparts still surrounding the Upper Town on three sides have been relatively well preserved, while the enclosure of the Lower Town was dismantled in the 19th century. The existing walls include two gates (Porte Saint-Jean and Porte de Jouy), twenty bastions whose ground-

plans are variously circular, square, and polygonal, and other features.

In the area of the Lower Town there were at first religious ensembles, including the churches of *Saint-Ayoul* (started in the 11th century) and *Sainte-Croix* (started in the 12th century). About 60% of the land was the property of the religious orders. When the town was extended into the valley, the orders created lots, building and selling houses, following a typology that corresponded to the needs of the fairs. Since the land did not allow underground spaces, the storage areas were built above ground, using a similar vaulted construction to that in the Upper Town. The occupation and building activities also necessitated the canalization and drainage of the land, and this developed into a sophisticated water management system.

The private buildings may be divided into two groups: those with multiple functions and those with solely commercial functions.

The multiple-function buildings are for the most part the private residences of merchants, the lower floors of which served as shops and stores. All date to the 12th and 13th centuries; some are built entirely in stone and other have timber-framed structures above lower stone courses. They are located either around the perimeter of the town, inside the defences, or around the *Place du Châtel*. This was the commercial heart of the town in which the fairs were held twice a year, in May and at Martinmas (11 November); another fair was held in the Lower Town in September. The latter was later transformed into a yearly market, in order to avoid overlap with other fairs in the region.

Commercial buildings such as the Tithe Barn (*Grange aux Dîmes*) are more monumental structures, with stores and counting-houses on several floors. A characteristic of all the ancient buildings in Provins, whether for mixed or for commercial use, is their system of vaulted cellars, dating from the 12th to the 14th centuries. These are either entirely underground (Upper Town) or partly built up above ground (Lower Town), and all open out to the street by means of a large door to which access is gained by a wide stone staircase. In cases where the surface area is large there are internal lines of pillars dividing the spaces into two or three bays.

The oldest building in the town is probably the 12th century *Maison Romane* (now the Museum), constructed in coursed dressed stone. Its location in the former Jewish quarter suggests that it may originally have been a rabbinical school or even a synagogue. Its large cellars, separated by semi-circular arches, were probably originally vaulted.

With the development of the fairs, there also grew various types of activities related to the crafts and elaboration of the merchandise, particularly woollen drapery, tanning, dyeing, and weaving. There was need for extended outdoor spaces to be able to stretch out the fabric for drying (*tiroirs*), and there were water mills on the canals required for the production of flour. The Lower Town of Provins is in particular testimony to the development of various handicrafts into an industrial process; the locations of this development still exist. Some of the canals have been covered, but most still remain as in the Middle Ages. There are three areas in the slopes of the plateau where clay was extracted for the process of removing grease from wool (fulling). These intricate underground galleries were

quarried at several levels and were later also used for storage of wine, etc. The entire town developed in relation to the fairs, either directly serving the fair functions or being indirectly related as an outcome.

## Management and Protection

### *Legal status*

Fifty-four historic buildings in the nominated area of Provins (plus a zone of 500m around each) are protected under the provisions of the French antiquities legislation (1913 Law on the protection of buildings, movable objects and archaeological remains; 1930 Protection of natural monuments and sites). Twelve of these are identified as *Monuments classés* and 41 are included on the list of *Monuments inscrits*. Ministerial authorization is required for any form of intervention, and the works are supervised by the Architecte-en-chef or the Architecte des Bâtiments de France.

The protection of individual properties is reinforced by the 1983 Law on Protection Zones for the Protection of the Architectural and Urban Heritage (ZPPAUP) and the 1962 Law on Protected Sectors (*Secteurs sauvegardés*). Relevant areas of the town of Provins are covered by these two statutes; the Lower Town was identified as a ZPPAUP in February 2001. The municipality has applied to be accepted in the programme of *Villes et Pays d'Art et d'Histoire*, which gives benefits particularly related to the presentation of the site. The intention is also to propose the historic area as a *Secteur sauvegardé*, which would provide instruments for more detailed conservation management, as well as facilitating resources for conservation work.

### *Management*

Ownership of the properties included within the nominated area is shared among regional and communal authorities and private individuals and institutions. Responsibility for ensuring the proper implementation of the different forms of statutory protection is vested in the Ministry of Culture. The direct functions are exercised by the Regional Director for Cultural Affairs (DRAC) for the Île-de-France, through the Regional Conservator for Historic Monuments. Individual proprietors are responsible for the maintenance of protected properties, all work being supervised by an Architecte des Bâtiments de France.

The nominated areas of the Upper and Lower Towns and their immediate surroundings are part of an extensive ZPPAUP (designated in 1990 and 2001 respectively), within which there is strict control over development.

Provins had had a series of plans since the 1960s, designed to protect and enhance its medieval centre. The 1984 *Plan d'occupation des sols* was revised in 1990 and again in 1996. There is also a series of programmes directed to individual monuments or for special aspects of protection, such as cultural tourism, control of advertisements, and pedestrianization.

## Conservation and Authenticity

### *Conservation history*

Restoration projects began in Provins in the mid 19th century at the Collegiate Church and the Tour César, and the ramparts were listed in 1865. It is noted that the historical value of Provins had already been recognized in the previous centuries, resulting in its retaining its historical integrity fairly well intact. The town suffered somewhat during the Hundred Years War in the 14th and 15th centuries, when the farms in the surrounding countryside were destroyed, as well as during the French Revolution, when the town lost several of its religious ensembles (including nine churches). There was no major restoration in the 19th century, unlike many other major sites in France. However, the fortifications of the Lower Town were replaced with boulevards, and some green areas and gardens were built over. Since the 1950s there has been work on different components of the town's medieval heritage, including recent consolidation and reinforcement of the ramparts of the Upper Town.

### *Authenticity and integrity*

Because of the decline in its economy, but also owing to the continuity of its functions, Provins has survived fairly well intact. Some destruction took place during the Hundred Years' War in the 14th and 15th centuries, as well as during the French Revolution, but this was fortunately relatively limited. At the present, Provins is a normal country town with an active population, associated with agriculture and related activities. The medieval town plan has been well preserved, as well as a large part of the historic buildings, the canals, and the water management system. About 150 historic houses have retained their medieval vaulted storage spaces. Though there have been minor changes since the 17th century, the town has preserved its historic integrity and the authenticity of the places related to the different functions of the fairs. The relationship of the Upper Town with the plains of the high plateau have also been preserved intact. Some new buildings in the Lower Town are unpretentious in respecting the overall patterns and volumes; they integrate well with the historic building stock.

## Evaluation

### *Action by ICOMOS*

Provins was first proposed to the World Heritage List as "The medieval town of Provins" in 1997. Following the ICOMOS evaluation, the State Party withdrew the nomination. In the present proposal, the nomination has been revised completely. An ICOMOS expert mission visited the site in March 2001.

### *Qualities*

Provins provides authentic testimony of an important and early economic development in central Europe related to fairs. Differing from markets, medieval fairs became an international institution, generating communication and contacts with distant countries, the Mediterranean, the Orient, and northern Europe. In this process, the Counts of Champagne, because of their political and economic ambitions, were in a key position; they initiated the institution of fairs in Champagne, which were later continued and imitated elsewhere. Many fundamental

elements of the fairs were first developed in Champagne, the initiator of the process. Provins is the best preserved example in Champagne, and it was built as a function of the fairs. The typology of the houses, the fortifications, the waterways, and other features all reflect the processes related to or generated by the fairs.

### *Comparative analysis*

The Champagne fairs started developing in four cities (Provins, Troyes, Lagny, Bar-sur-Aube) from the 11th and early 12th century. Of these four cities, Provins is the only one to have preserved its medieval fabric intact. It had fairs from at least as early as 1120, as confirmed by original charters dating 1137 and 1164.

The Hanseatic League developed from the early 13th century, starting with German merchants who had settled in Gotland (at Visby, inscribed on the World Heritage List in 1995: criteria iv, v). From 1241 the leadership was passed to Lübeck (1987: iv), and the League gradually developed into a major association of "free cities" situated in present-day Germany, the Baltic States, England, Poland, and Russia. Fairs were established in Bruges (2000: ii, iv, vi) in 1200, and its golden era extended from the 14th to 15th centuries. Another fair, based on the Champagne model, developed outside the Hansa in Frankfurt-am-Main in 1240. There were contacts between the cities of the Hansa and those of Champagne. Fairs also developed in Northern Italy (Genoa, Siena), the first being held in 1179.

In this context, the fairs of Champagne anticipated the other developments, often providing a model and reference, and Provins represents the only remaining testimony of this early development.

### *ICOMOS recommendations for future action*

ICOMOS recognizes the degree of protection implemented so far in the historic town of Provins and its surroundings. Nevertheless, and in accordance with the intention of the authorities, ICOMOS recommends that the nominated core area should be designated as a *Secteur sauvegardé*, in order to guarantee control of the urban fabric as a whole, particularly considering the vulnerability of this type of heritage in view of any major development and consequent transformation in the future.

## Brief description

The fortified medieval town of Provins is situated in the former territory of the powerful Counts of Champagne. It bears witness to early developments in the organization of international trading fairs and the wool industry. Provins has well preserved its urban structure, which was built specifically as a function of the fairs and related activities.

## Statement of Significance

The historic fortified town of Provins is an outstanding and authentic example of a medieval fair town in the territories of the Counts of Champagne. It represents an important interchange of human values which led to the early developments of international fairs in central Europe. The institution of fairs guaranteed the protection of long-distance transport of merchandise between Europe and the Orient,

and led to the development of activities such as banking and exchange, tanning, dyeing and weaving of textiles, etc, through which handicrafts evolved into an industrial process. The existing medieval urban layout and houses of Provins represent an outstanding example of an architectural ensemble specifically built to fulfil such functions, including merchants' houses, storage spaces, mills, water management systems, open spaces for treatment of textiles, farmhouses, and religious ensembles. Recognition has also been given to the town for its well preserved defence systems, built for the protection of the fairs.

#### **ICOMOS Recommendation**

That this property be inscribed on the World Heritage List on the basis of *criteria ii and iv*:

*Criterion ii* At the beginning of the 2nd millennium Provins was one of several towns in the territory of the Counts of Champagne that became the venues for great annual trading fairs linking northern Europe with the Mediterranean world.

*Criterion iv* Provins preserves to a high degree the architecture and urban layout that characterize these great medieval fair towns.

#### **Bureau Recommendation**

That this property be inscribed on the World Heritage List on the basis of *criteria ii and iv*.

ICOMOS, September 2001